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## Non-farmer's Guide to Agriculture (Polk County)

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### Recommended Citation

Knapp, Jill and Griffieon, LaVon, "Non-farmer's Guide to Agriculture (Polk County)" (1999). *Leopold Center Completed Grant Reports*. 136.

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# Non-farmer's Guide to Agriculture (Polk County)

**Abstract**

An educational program helped non-farmers better understand agriculture through presentations and farm tours. Approximately 850 people participated and reported that the program was an enlightening, worthwhile experience. Two focus groups were held to assess attitudes about land use and quality of life issues in the Des Moines metro area.

**Keywords**

Community-based food systems, Human systems, demographics and beginning farmer programs

**Disciplines**

Agricultural Education



## Non-farmer's Guide to Agriculture (Polk County)

**Abstract:** *An educational program helped non-farmers better understand agriculture through presentations and farm tours. Approximately 850 people participated and reported that the program was an enlightening, worthwhile experience. Two focus groups were held to assess attitudes about land use and quality of life issues in the Des Moines metro area.*

**Principal Investigator:**

Jill Knapp  
Executive Director  
Conservation Districts  
of Iowa  
Ankeny, Iowa

**Co-investigator:**

LaVon Griffieon  
Ankeny, Iowa

**Budget:**

\$6,600 for one year

### Background

The Non-farmer's Guide to Agriculture was first developed by the Soil and Water Conservation District in Johnson County (Iowa) to educate urban residents about agricultural issues. The program (funded by the Leopold Center), consisted of a lecture and field trip each season, and was well-received, helping to improve rural-urban communication.

The basic project concept was transferred to the Des Moines area as a model for this project. Following a disappointing response to the initial session, changes were made in the program format. The objectives remained the same, but target audiences were more carefully chosen. Two focus groups were conducted to determine how farmers and non-farmers felt about agricultural and land issues.

Objectives of the project were to:

- Provide opportunities for non-farm residents to learn about farm practices and the importance of agriculture in Iowa and the United States,
- Increase awareness of the importance of natural resources on which the farm economy is based, and
- Introduce non-farm residents to the concepts of sustainable agriculture.

### Approach and methods

The program was begun with the cooperation of the Iowa Heartland RC&D, Conservation

Districts of Iowa, Des Moines Area Community College (DMACC), and LaVon Griffieon, an Ankeny area farmer. DMACC served as the instructional site and promoted the program through their course catalog and newspaper listings. Lisa Cooper of Heartland RC&D, Jill Knapp from Conservation Districts of Iowa, and LaVon Griffieon provided program development and implementation.

The first two programs were set for October and February with a two-hour lecture on Tuesday evening followed by a Saturday morning field trip to the Griffieon farm. October program topics were: "What is agriculture and why should I care?", "Iowa agriculture", and "Fall harvesting". Lectures were supplemented with publications on agriculture and farming.

### Results and discussion

*October session* Despite significant amounts of publicity by DMACC and the Conservation Districts of Iowa, attendance at the first session was disappointing. Ten people registered, but only six appeared at the Tuesday evening session and only two were present for the Saturday morning farm tour.

The intent was to survey the participants before and after the sessions to see how their level of understanding changed. The small number of participants made this impractical. Of the six attendees, most appeared to know little about basic agriculture and had attended

**Table 1: List of Presentations and Tours**

Date	Group	Number	Activity
6/16/98	Food, Land and People Teachers	21	5 hour tour of farm
6/17/98	Teachers Academy for Agricultural Awareness	38	2.25 hour presentation
6/18/98	Polk County Kiwanis	35	Presentation
6/19/98	Teachers Academy for Agricultural Awareness	40	Presentation
6/25/98	Olmstead Faculty		Tour of farm
	Jay Thompson and Lois Weisly 4-H Outreach	58 students	Tour of farm
8/25/98	Eric Anderson, DM City Manager, Elly Walkowiak	2	Tour of farm
9/9/98	Drake Environmental Science and Policy Program	16	Tour of farm
9/15/98	ISU Sustainable Ag Class	50	Tour of farm
9/26/98	Thousand Friends of Iowa		Tour of farm
9/29/98	Mayor's Urban Summit	15	Presentation
9/29/98	Thousand Friends of Iowa	5	Tour of farm
10/3/98	Thousand Friends of Iowa	8	Tour of farm
10/4/98	Thousand Friends of Iowa	15	Tour of farm
10/10/98	Board of 1000 Friends of Iowa	12	Tour of farm
10/12/98	OLIH Knights of Columbus	120	Presentation
10/18/98	Ankeny 4-H	45	
10/21/98	Westwood Elementary School	120	Presentation
10/23/98	Harvest Community Church	20	Farm Tour
11/4/98	County Planning and Zone State Conference	45	Presentation
11/10/98	ISU sustainable ag class	50	Presentation
11/11/98	OLIH Religious Ed Class Grades 9-12	15	Presentation
11/16/98	Emmanuel Lutheran Church Jubilee Group	100	Presentation
11/17/98	Des Moines Business Women	20	Presentation
<b>Total</b>		<b>850</b>	

out of curiosity. There was little discussion, even about issues that might be expected to arouse comment.

*Changes in program structure* Rather than making another attempt to attract the general public through DMACC, it was decided to target specific, individual groups for the program. Two meetings also appeared to be too many, and the contact time was cut down to a single three- to four-hour program to be held on LaVon Griffieon's farm. The project organizers decided to conduct focus groups to gather information on perceptions of urban and farm dwellers.

*Results of the revised program* LaVon Griffieon made numerous contacts promoting the farm tours to service organizations, churches, and teachers. Interest in the farm tours increased in late summer and fall, when attendees learned about crop production practices, soil conservation, and farmland preservation issues. Nearly 850 people were reached

through the presentation and farm tours. Response to the tours was overwhelmingly positive with many participants claiming new knowledge about agriculture and farming. The group developed a promotional brochure with an open invitation to tour the Griffieon farm.

## Conclusions

After the initial effort to reach a broad group of non-farmers through the DMACC site presentations was unsuccessful, carefully targeting specific audiences emerged as a more efficient method of program delivery.

## Impact of results

This program has increased awareness of the issues of preserving natural resources and farmland among the participants, including some influential individuals in a position to influence land use policies in central Iowa.

## Focus groups

*Background* Two focus groups were conducted, one with seven Des Moines area farmers and one with eight non-farmer residents of Des Moines and suburbs. Individuals were chosen to reflect a broad range of personal characteristics, backgrounds, and viewpoints. Both focus groups occurred on July 15, 1998, with facilitation provided by Rich Pirog of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Wayne Petersen from the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

*Grouped responses to focus group questions* Both farmers and non-farmers had similar ideas about what constitutes “quality of life” or quality time. Freedom was mentioned by both groups, as was appreciation for the environment and spending time outdoors. Urbanites were interested in safety and farmers spoke in favor of a community where they could trust others.

Farmers indicated a sense of pride or satisfaction connected with their work. The non-farm group tended to find some aspects of country living (quiet and privacy, scenery) more attractive than farming as an occupation. Farmers asked about the least appealing aspects of working in the city focused on the noise, lack of space, and privacy in urban areas rather than missing farming as an occupation.

The least attractive part of farming cited by both groups was the risk, though the urban group focused on use of chemicals and fertilizers and farm accidents. They also viewed farming as requiring long hours and being confining. Farmers were more concerned with outside influences over which they had little control (government, markets, industrial agriculture) and the financial risks. Farmers thought city living would be attractive because of the certainty of knowing your income, hours, and benefits.

When farmers were asked what things they thought non-farmers seem to understand about agriculture, they mentioned the volatility of the profession, the desirable working environment, and the good work ethic. The farm group, however, believed that non-farmers did not appreciate the skills farmers must cultivate or the level of stress (financial, weather-related, and regulatory) under which farms operate.

On the whole, non-farmers believed that farmers understood urban life. The only qualifiers were that farmers didn’t always realize that what they do impacts urban life and that urban dwellers are also worried about erosion and water quality.

Both groups commented that rapid growth in the Des Moines metro area has increased conflicts between farmers and non-farmers about land use issues. Farmers worried that urbanites overlooked the connection between people and their agricultural roots.

Both groups mentioned negative consequences from the rapid growth: more roads and traffic, higher taxes, lack of respect for the land and the agricultural heritage. Farmers seemed to have a more negative take on how rapid growth had impacted urban Des Moines. They cited the deterioration of the inner city and the lack of incentives to populate the core urban area.

The groups differed on what type of programs and projects should be implemented to address land use issues. The farm group focused clearly on issues limiting the expansion of the city into farming areas. The urban group looked for solutions to make the city environment more inhabitable and appealing to residents.

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